

The Complete Haldeman Story

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and Joseph DiMona

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EXCERPT:

Publicizing The Cuban Angle

THE COMPLICATIONS began that night [June 20], when I received a telephone call which is unknown to anyone but the president and me to this day. I believe a tape does not exist because the call was probably made from a telephone in the White House Residence which was not covered by the taping system.

But my notes on the call add important new information on Nixon's role in the cover-up. For in this telephone conversation, on our very first evening back in Washington, Nixon himself initiated the idea of raising funds for the Watergate burglars in an indirect manner. Even more surprising, he indirectly suggested the idea of involving the CIA in the Watergate problem three days before the famous "smoking gun" conversation, in which the same idea was consummated.

The telephone call was curious to me from the beginning because Nixon sounded so relieved. He must have found out from Ehrlichman or someone else that Colson's story of innocence would hold, and might even be valid. Now Nixon said to me on the telephone, "This thing may be under control because of the Cubans who went in there. A lot of people think the break-in was done by anti-Castro Cubans."

I said, "Well, I've never understood myself, what Cubans were doing there."

The president warmed to the notion even more. "Right. I'm going to talk to Bebe and have him round up some anti-McGovern Cubans in Miami. You know, those Cubans down there hate McGovern."

And it was then the president made his suggestion about payments to the defendants. He said, "Those people who got caught are going to need money. I've been thinking about how to do it."

AT THAT POINT I hadn't even thought of the problem of the defendants in human terms. What consideration I had given to the whole subject had been concentrated so much on the question of who sent them in, that I'd forgotten those were real people in jail and we were, one way or the other, responsible for them. I said I didn't know how; that maybe they had lawyers. Nixon said he had a better idea. "I'm going to have Bebe start a fund for them in Miami. Call it an anti-Castro fund, and publicize the hell out of the Cuban angle. That way we kill two birds with one stone. Get money to the boys to help them, and maybe pick up some points against McGovern on the Cuban angle."

Nixon never missed a chance to counterattack when he felt he was in trouble. This time his approach sounded OK to me. Unfortunately it was to have reverberations to this day. Because when John Dean approached me later and asked if he could use Nixon lawyer and fundraiser Herb Kalmbach to raise money for the defendants, it never even occurred to me to question the basic concept. The pattern had been set by the president, beginning with that telephone call to me on June 20, and I saw no reason why Kalmbach should not lend a hand in the effort.

Incidentally, Nixon was to refer to this "Cuban Defense Fund" in his later meetings with John Dean in instant reaction to Dean's mention of the efforts to raise money for the defendants. He remembered it clearly then, although he later denied on raising efforts.

BUT THEN in this call Nixon veered sharply off the money angle into completely unknown terrain, as far as I was concerned. In fact, I was puzzled when he told me, "Tell Ehrlichman this whole group of Cubans is tied to the Bay of Pigs."

After a pause I said, "The Bay of Pigs? What does that have to do with this?"

But Nixon merely said, "Ehrlichman will know what I mean," and dropped the subject.

After our staff meeting the next morning I accompanied Ehrlichman to his office and gave him the president's message. Ehrlichman's eyebrows arched, and he smiled. "Our brothers from Langley? He's suggesting I twist or break a few wires?"

"I don't know. All he told me was 'Tell Ehrlichman this whole group of Cubans is tied to the Bay of Pigs.'"

Ehrlichman leaned back in his chair, tapping a pencil on the edge of his desk. "All right," he said, "message accepted."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Zero," said Ehrlichman. "I want to stay out of this one."

He was referring to an unspoken feud between CIA Director Richard Helms and Nixon. The two were polar opposites in background: Helms, the aloof, aristocratic, Eastern elitist; Nixon the poor boy (he never let you forget it) from a small California town. Ehrlichman had found himself in the middle of this feud as far back as 1969, immediately after Nixon assumed office. Nixon had called Ehrlichman into his office and said he wanted all the facts and documents the CIA had on the Bay of Pigs, a complete report on the whole project.

About six months after the 1969 conversation, Ehrlichman had stopped in my office. "Those bastards in Langley are holding back something. They just dig in their heels and say the president can't have it. Period. Imagine that! The